

Trauma Incarcerated: Investigating the Link Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adult Criminal Offending Behaviors



Presley Camp; Mentor: Alora McCarthy, M.A.
USF Departments of Psychology & Criminology

The Center for Justice Research & Policy ~ Directors: Edelyn Verona, Ph.D & Bryanna Fox, Ph.D

Introduction

- In this study, we are interested in the relationship between childhood trauma and adult criminal offending behaviors in incarcerated individuals.
- Different forms of childhood trauma have all been connected to certain long-term effects. These can include difficulties with:
 - Mental illness, relationships, self-destructive behaviors, substance abuse, violence, etc (Elam & Kleist, 1999).
- Literature varies on the criteria used to define childhood trauma, often focusing on only one specific form of trauma. In this study, we use 10 different forms to assess childhood trauma on a larger, more realistic spectrum.

- The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire categorizes these forms into three groups: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction (Felitti, et al., 1998).
- Traumatic childhood experiences are highly prevalent in incarcerated populations (Altintas & Bilici, 2018). But do they exist *more* in those who exhibit more criminal behavior?

Objectives

To identify whether there are positive correlations between:

- Participants' ACE scores and reported frequency of **offenses**.
- Participants' ACE scores and reported frequency of **violent offenses**.
- Participants' ACE scores and reported frequency of **arrests**.

Participants

- Between 2021 and 2023, **1000** individuals incarcerated at the Pasco County Jail in Land O' Lakes, FL volunteered to participate in a 20-30 minute interview.
- Participants ranged from 18 to 73 years old ($M = 36.7$), with over two-thirds of the sample identifying as Male (68.5%) and 31.2% as Female.

- Participants came from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. Participants (%) by Racial and Ethnic Groups

Race	Percentage (%)
Caucasian (White)	70.7%
African American (Black)	11.9%
Asian	0.6%
Pacific Islander or Hawaiian	0.3%
Native American	1.2%
Mixed Race	8.4%
Other	6.9%
Total	100%
Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
Hispanic or Latinx	16.1%
Non-Hispanic	83.9%
Total	100%

Methods

- Criminal offending behavior was assessed using the Self-Reported Offenses (SRO) questionnaire, which measures the frequency of 20 possible offenses committed in the 12 months prior. On a Likert-type scale, scores range from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*more times than I can count*).
- 8 of the 20 items were also measured as violent offenses, following the classification of "violent crime" provided by the FBI's UCR program (2019).
- Frequency of arrests was measured on a scale from 1 (*once*) to 5 (*more times than I can count*), which included all arrests from one's lifetime.
- Childhood trauma was measured using the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) questionnaire, which includes 10 items concerning the actions of adults in one's household before the age of 18. Each question is scored as either 0 (*No*) or 1 (*Yes*).
- In this sample, the distribution of ACE scores was significantly skewed to the left with the most frequent score being a 9. $M = 5.20$, $Med. = 6$, $SD = 3.05$.
- Outside of incarceration, less than 17% of people have a score of 4 or higher (CDC, 2022).

To see the full list of ACE and SRO items, please scan the provided QR code.

Results

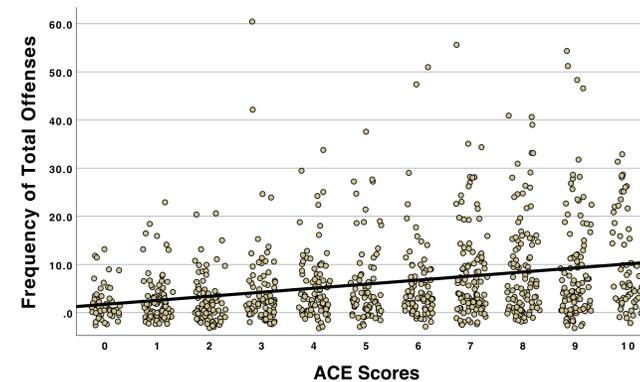


Figure 1. ACE Scores by Frequency of Total Self-Reported Offenses. Frequency refers to the total score participants received on the SRO.

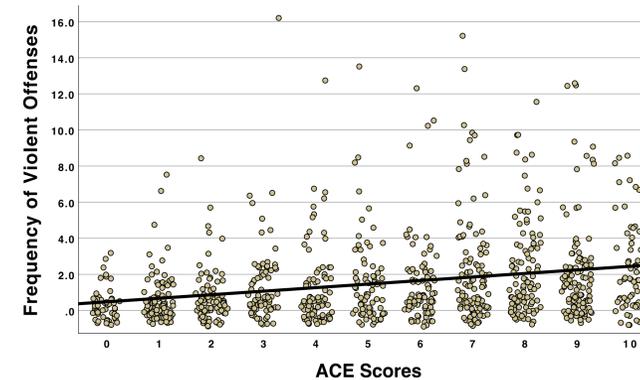


Figure 2. ACE Scores by Frequency of Violent Self-Reported Offenses. Frequency refers to the total score participants received on the SRO for violent offenses only.

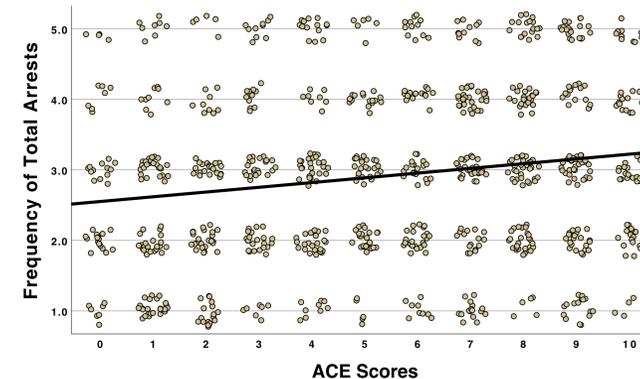


Figure 3. ACE Scores by Frequency of Self-Reported Total Arrests. Frequency refers to the score participants received for lifetime arrests.

Discussion

- To test our hypotheses, we conducted three Kendall's Tau (τ) correlational analyses. Using one-tailed tests, we found:
 - A **medium, positive correlation** between participants' ACE scores and frequency of total offenses ($\tau = .240$, $p < .001$). See *Figure 1*.
 - A **medium, positive correlation** between participants' ACE scores and frequency of violent offenses ($\tau = .237$, $p < .001$). See *Figure 2*.
 - A **small, positive correlation** between participants' ACE scores and frequency of total arrests ($\tau = .128$, $p < .001$). See *Figure 3*.
- These results suggest that, in this sample, having more traumatic experiences as a child is correlated with having a higher frequency of offenses, as well as violent offenses over the 12 months prior to their interview, and a higher frequency of arrests over their lifetime.

Conclusion

- Overall, the findings of this study support our hypotheses, which can lead us to infer that experiencing more traumatic events during one's developing years is related to having more behavioral problems that continue into adulthood, including criminal behaviors.
- We can also conclude that incarcerated individuals, on average, experience an abnormal amount of traumatic childhood events compared to the general population.

Future Directions

- We interpret these findings as suggestions for further research in the fields of psychology and criminology, in which we can hopefully discover practices to help deter criminal behavior in adulthood by intervening during childhood.
- We encourage researchers to examine childhood trauma-informed interventions as rehabilitative practices in correctional institutions.
- We hope to spread awareness to parents/guardians about the long-term impacts of childhood trauma.

References

Our full list of references can be found by scanning the provided QR code.



Contact

Presley Camp
presleycamp@usf.edu
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